



Race Permanence and the War

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RACE PERMANENCE AND THE WAR

Tolerance is a beautiful thing in its place ; but it is also one of our American sins. Some time ago on a lake steamer I heard a man, evidently of German antecedents, talking to two others of his race, and one thing that he said stuck in my memory. Germany, in his opinion, had been guilty of so many outrages as pretty thoroughly to have alienated American sympathy. But for that, as he judged, the defeat of the Fatherland at the end of the war would have given her a large share of our good will, simply because of our natural American tendency to sympathize with the under dog. Already there are signs that Germany is in the way to profit by that temperamental generosity on our part. She is not defeated yet, but her failure at Verdun and her inability to hold the Anglo-French advance on the Somme and about St. Quentin, to say nothing of what the entrance of America will mean, permit us to look confidently to the day when her strength will definitely have crumbled. Then, when we think that she has learned her lesson, there is grave danger that too many of us will be ready to accept her on a footing of renewed friendship almost as cordial as that we give to England.

In dealing with the sins of neighbors, the vital question is whether a particular fault is merely a particular fault or is a settled character,—a something that does not vanish with forgiveness, that is only strengthened and made more secure by neighborly endurance. In settling this question it is not enough to look at the matter as it stands to-day or at our neighbor as he seems to-day. What was he yesterday? What was he last year? What was his father before him? and his father's father? What are the ideals of conduct and character that have shaped the family life and made him what he is? This is the sort of question we must ask of Germany, and it will be instructive comparatively to ask it at the same time of England.

Germany and England have each of them a folk-tale that reaches almost epic proportions,—the origin of each is lost in the mists of a thousand years,—the *Nibelungenlied* and *Beowulf*. They are the things that these two peoples have preserved out

of the dim spiritual life to which they had come in the days when they swept down on Europe from the north. The Danes also make some claim to the *Beowulf*, since it was perhaps written while the Angles and Saxons were still a part of the Danish world ; but that is immaterial. It belongs to the English. It was theirs, it was what they took with them, it had the color of their hearts and minds ; and so they cherished it and made it an enduring thing by which we may judge them and their children. No less the *Nibelungenlied* is what the Germans preserved, and by it we judge them.

At first glance the *Nibelungenlied* and the *Beowulf* may seem to be of a piece because they are full of the heroism of warriors. That the difference between them has not been fully realized appears in the unfortunate circumstance that the *Nibelungenlied* is put into the hands of school children in the grades here in the United States much more widely than the *Beowulf*. In some respects it is no doubt simpler, but that simplicity is the result of the circumstance that its ideals, its life and spirit, its story and its revelation of character, are all nearer to the primitive savagery of the race. Whether educators think that the youths who may aspire to be president will have their native instincts of blood-thirstiness stimulated or satiated by these tales is a question worth a passing glance ; but a bigger question waits.

Heroism has always seemed a high thing to noble men and noble races, but the nobler the race the more has the quality of the heroism seemed dependent upon its motive and its object. It is the difference in motive that makes the *Nibelungenlied* incomparably less noble than *Beowulf*. The heroes of the German folk-tale are little more than brutes revelling in blood and gratifying their animal passions and their animal ambitions in a blind and wanton lust. Even the gentlest and sweetest of the human creations of this primitive Teutonic fancy, Kriemhild, marries the Hun Atli, or Attila, for no nobler purpose than that of soaking the earth with the blood of her kinsmen in revenge for the death of her first husband, Siegfried. The prime motive for every deed of bravery and every fling at fortune is rooted in the assertion of self, in the desire to be or seem more courageous and stronger than somebody else. From beginning

to end it is animated by no worthier aim than that sort of animal self-glorification. Kings are kings merely because they have power and riches, not because they contribute in the slightest to the happiness of a single soul by so much as a glimmer of such chivalry as shines through the later great heritage of the English race, Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. It is power exhibiting itself ruthlessly, grossly, exultantly, and cunningly,—power employing the arts of Diabolus without a scruple,—that we are asking our children to admire when in their tender years we put before them the *Nibelungenlied*.

The motives and the spirit that animate the *Beowulf* are radically different. It has three main episodes,—the fight with Grendel, the fight with Grendel's mother, the fight with the dragon. Beowulf undertakes each of these modestly. He is actuated by no vainglorious wish to gather to himself the homage of men. To quote Disraeli: "The hero had come, not to seek feud nor to provoke insult, but with the free offering of his own life to relieve the sovereign of the East Danes, whose thrones for twelve years had vainly perished, struggling with a mysterious being,—one of the accursed progeny of Cain,—a foul and solitary creature of the morass and the marsh." It is as a hero kindled to valor by the wrongs and sufferings of his fellow-men that Beowulf waits in the hall for Grendel, wrenches the fiend's arm from its socket, and drives him howling with rage and pain into the night. It is in the same spirit that he seeks Grendel's mother, when she has come to revenge herself upon the Danes, tearing their bodies and drinking their blood, kills her, and returns safely from the sea-depths, where he has found her. Again it is in the same spirit that he tracks the fire-dragon to his den, where at last he loses his life.

Through *Beowulf* the thoughtful reader will easily observe an unflinching tone of liege loyalty. Beowulf is not a prince in the pride of his state and power, but a people's king. He is the "good-mooded hero," the "warmen's defender," the "gold-friend of heroes," the "long-worthy ruler." It is a tale of bloodshed and battle, but of battle undertaken for the lessening of bloodshed. In the *Nibelungenlied* bloodshed is its own excuse for being, and the heroes draw their swords for the mere joy of

seeing the red tide flow. They accomplish nothing but destruction. They achieve nothing but the woes of their women and the harrowing of their hoard-heaps. Beowulf establishes the security of a people and founds the kingship which he at last accepts in the grateful love of those he serves.

Through both poems there runs a clear thread of fate. It is an underlying mysticism of the primitive Teutonic temper, common to the two branches of the race, but working itself out in different ways. In the *Nibelungenlied* it is fantastic, grotesque, lawless. The heroes do not oppose themselves to it. They are but creatures of its caprices and its wildness. Where it bears them they go, and there is no effort of their moral natures to rise above it and subdue it. In the *Beowulf* fate is a grim thing no less; but man does not drop unresisting into its current. Things that are to be will be; but they must be met and conquered or endured. They are not any the more to be taken into alliance because they are the inevitable and the immutable. Perhaps nowhere else is the essential groundwork of the English character so notably seen in brief compass as in two lines of this poem, enduring these thousand years to give testimony to the persistence of what is born in the blood:—

Fate often saves
An undoomed man, if his courage holds out.

For some hundreds of years now Englishmen have believed in this, and have lived and verified it on the battlefield and elsewhere with wonderful fidelity to the traditions of their race.

From this survey of the *Nibelungenlied* there stand out two Germanic qualities that have come to their most terrible and most devastating flower since July, 1914. There is first the astounding aggressiveness that gave the main impulse to the heroism of all the Nibelungs. It exhibits itself no less astoundingly to-day in the man who some time before the beginning of the war declared in the familiar fashion of his royal house that nothing of importance could now be undertaken anywhere in the world without the German emperor. Second, there is the entire absence of moral quality and moral consciousness that is the accompaniment and the complement of this violence in the assertion of self. One expression of this incapacity for moral realiza-

tion is peculiarly interesting at this present hour. Hagen, among the heroes of the Nibelungs, perhaps second in importance only to Siegfried himself, at the demand of Queen Brunhild, for reasons that would not have been sufficient for a Beowulf, has killed Siegfried treacherously, luring him to kneel down and drink at a spring in the forest when they are out hunting together, and then from behind piercing him through the neck with his spear in the only spot in which he is vulnerable. At last Kriemhild, now the wife of Atli, finds Hagen in her power, and she upbraids him bitterly for his slaying of the lover of her youth. This is Hagen's answer and defence as it appears in one of the translations that I have at hand:—

“Well,” he said, “I never denied that I did it. The Queen of Burgundy was insulted for his sake, and the royal house dishonored. The shame had to be washed out with blood, and as the hero was too strong to be attacked in the open field, he had to be slain by cunning. Any one may blame me, any one may strive to avenge the deed, I am not afraid. I have no cap of darkness, and am easily to be found.”

In its spirit this varies not a hairsbreadth from the present justification of themselves that the Germans offer for their violation of Belgium, their destruction of the Lusitania, and their concurrence in the massacre of the Armenians by their allies, the Turks. France was too strong to be attacked fairly across the border, and she must therefore be attacked foully through Belgium. Merchant ships like the Lusitania cannot be attacked safely in accordance with international law by submarines, and they must therefore be attacked lawlessly. The Turks do not find it convenient or comfortable to deal with the Armenians as if they were men, and therefore they feel themselves justified, and the Germans think them justified, in transforming themselves into fiends. This is Hagen and his fellow Nibelungs living still in their spiritual descendants and trying to dictate the terms of modern world diplomacy from Berlin. This is Hagen again, as unmindful of his moral delinquency and as unashamed as if there were no such thing as honor in the world.

Is there, then, an average of human goodness independent of race and place? When the war is over and Germany has been punished for her sins, shall we accept her as a good neighbor equally with England? Shall we look upon her moral lapse as a thing of the day and the hour, or shall we think of it as a taint in nature that only the centuries can eradicate? Secondly, shall we still nourish our children upon the blood-lust of the *Nibelungenlied*? or shall we rather let them have their own heritage in the gentle and humane spirit and the clear and high-minded fortitude of *Beowulf*? Doubtless, in the large sense, "we shall have to live with Germany after the war"; but, with this thousand-year-old record of evil ingrained in her nature clearly before us, we should not take her intimately to our bosoms. Races are not the same; and it is significant here that Lombroso's studies in criminology gave him the warrant for saying that only English and Frenchmen had never been willing to be ruled by criminals. Until Germans have come to realize deeply that kingship in our day is not a thing of the sword only, they should hardly be admitted freely into the full comity of civilized nations. Socially a little personal disapproval, not so much expressed as made evident, often goes a long way in bringing a social offender to a better state of mind. Society, as such, could not exist if it were to keep its doors open charitably for every comer. Morals and manners both would suffer wreckage at once. Internationally the same principle must hold. Morals and manners in that kind demand that Germany shall be given the cold shoulder long beyond the day when politically she pays the price of the war.

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